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Chapter Seven

SOME NOTES ON RELIGION, SUPERSTITIONS, AND MORAL LAW

NUER GODS

776 THE Nuer has long feared and worshipped he knows not what. There are various gods, Deng, Win, Cwol, and others. Some have power over rain, some over crops, disease, death, or lightning.

778 Some animals are considered sacred, but what is sacred
825 to one man is not necessarily held sacred by another. It may be the crocodile, or the land crocodile, or a certain kind of snake. Every Nuer is certain to have a sacred animal which he will neither kill nor eat.

782 Sheep and cattle are sacrificed on various grounds in order to appease one god or another.

[776] When a person is struck by lightning and killed he is
766 said to have been taken by the god of lightning—Cwol. His body is laid upon a rack that is made in his house or barn and then covered entirely—over, under, and on all sides—with wood, ash, and soil. The door of the house is closed and the house is left desolate except for its silent owner. A person who has been struck and killed by lightning is never buried in the ground as others are.

784 No one will touch a person who has been stunned by lightning until he regains consciousness, for fear the god in him may be transmitted by contact.

778 A Nuer always considers the relatives of one who has been killed by lightning as sacred.

[324] Any one who has some physical or mental deformity
[784] may be considered as having a god in him and be regarded as sacred and avoided for that reason.

781 The Nuer worship is a worship of fear. The missionary feels as if he were living in Old Testament times, and

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in a way this is true. The Nuer find it hard to believe 787
that God is a God of love. Even when they learn to love
Him they still find it hard to trust Him when things go
wrong. But the missionaries do not get too discouraged,
for, after all, is not that habit world-wide?

A large portion of the Nuer tribe has never heard the 177
Christian message. Of those who have heard it, few have
yet made full response. Yet the influence of those who
honour the name of Christ will make its mark upon the
Nuer and lead to the forsaking of unworthy customs
inherited from the past.

Although the Arab traders throughout Nuerland are
Moslem, their religion has not appealed to the Nuer; the
Moslem faith has so far gained no ground in Nuerland.

SUPERSTITIONS

The Nuer mind is full of superstitions, some of them 000
being age-old. They believe them implicitly; 'Would our
parents lie to us?' they ask when any doubt is expressed.
Many of the superstitions have to do with cattle (see
Chapter II) and marriage (see Chapter V.)

A woman must never drink milk during her menstrual 541
period. Nor at this time may she eat food which has been
cooked in a kettle in which milk has been boiled. Why?
Because to do so would harm the cattle.

If a woman is impregnated while still nursing a child, 543
they cut a small piece off the ear of a dog and this is worn
around the child's neck in order to keep it from harm.
Any one walking in the footsteps of the father of this
child may be the victim of dreadful things—his head may
split right down the back.

If a child should have an attack of vomiting just after 753
some strangers have been to the village, the strangers are
at once suspected of having in part caused the attack.

GOD

II

It is in the light of their feeling that man is dependent on God and helpless without his aid and that God, though a friend and present, is yet also remote that we are to interpret a word Nuer frequently use about themselves when speaking to or about God: *doar*. The meanings of this word given in Nuer-English dictionaries, 'idiot', 'stupid', 'fool', and 'weak-minded', do not adequately convey the sense of the word, especially when it is used to refer to man's relationship to God. Then it means rather 'simple' or 'foolish' or 'ignorant'—'idiot' in the sense the word used to have in the English language and which the word from which it is derived had in Greek. Nuer say that they are just ignorant people who do not understand the mysteries of life and death, and of God and the spirits, and why things happen as they do.

A favourite Nuer expression is '*yie wicda*', 'my head goes round' or 'I am bewildered'. They are at a loss because they are just foolish people who do not understand the why and the wherefore. In saying that they are simple or foolish or ignorant Nuer are not being modest in respect to other peoples, though I have often had the impression that they regard themselves as guileless compared with other peoples, especially compared with the Dinka, whom they regard as cleverer and more cunning than themselves, a difference dramatized in one of their myths. The story, which reminds us of that of Esau and Jacob, is cited by Nuer to explain why they have always raided the Dinka. Nuer and Dinka—the peoples are personified in the myth—were both sons of God, who had promised to give an old cow to Dinka and its young calf to Nuer. Dinka came by night to God's byre and deceived him by imitating Nuer's voice, and God gave him the calf. When God found that he had been deceived he charged Nuer to raid the herds of Dinka to the end of time. In other words, the Nuer may be robbers but the Dinka are thieves. Another story relates that God offered men the choice between cattle and rifles. Nuer and Dinka chose cattle and Arabs and Europeans chose rifles. Here both Nuer and Dinka are figured as simple compared to Arabs and Europeans. Nuer regard themselves as having manly virtues exceeding those of other peoples, but compared with them they are artless. However, when they use the word *doar* in a religious context they are speaking of themselves being foolish in

781 776 comparison with God and in his eyes. The same idea is expressed in speaking of themselves as *cok*, small black ants, particularly in their hymns to spirits of the air, that is, they are God's ants, or in other words what a tiny ant is to man, so man is to God. This is a conscious and explicit analogy. Thus Father J. Kiggen quotes the phrases '*kondial labne cuogh, ke mic kuoine ke kuoth*', which I would translate 'we, all of us, have the nature of ants in that we are very tiny in respect to God', and '*kondial gaad cuoghni ke kuoth*', which I would translate 'all of us are like little ants in the sight of God'.[1] The same metaphor has been recorded for the Dinka by Archdeacon Shaw.[2] We are reminded of Isaiah's likening of men to grasshoppers (xl. 22).

In speaking about themselves as being like ants and as being simple Nuer show a humbleness in respect to God which contrasts with their proud, almost provocative, and towards strangers even insulting, bearing to men; and indeed humbleness, a consciousness of creatureliness, is a further element of meaning in the word *dear*, as is also humility, not contending against God but suffering without complaint. Humbleness and humility are very evident on occasions of religious expression among the Nuer—in the manner and content of prayer, in the purpose and meaning of sacrifices, and, perhaps most evidently, in their sufferings. Nuer accept misfortunes with resignation. Whatever the occasion of death and other misfortunes may be, whether they be what Nuer call *dueng cok*, the lot of created things, or whether they be the result of what they call *duevi*, faults, they come to one and all alike, and Nuer say that they must be accepted as the will of God. The best that can be hoped for is that God will hear the prayers and accept the sacrifices of those who suffer and spare them any extra burden. Nuer do not complain when misfortunes befall them. They say that it is God's will (*ruac kuoth*), that it is his world (*e ghoandi*), and—I have often heard Nuer say this in their sufferings—that he is good (*goagh*). When a child dies women lament, but only for a little while, and men are silent. They say that God has taken his own and that they must not complain: perhaps he will give them another child. This is a common refrain with Nuer, especially in their invocations at mortuary ceremonies. They say of the dead man that God has taken him and that he was in the right in the matter, for it was his man; he has taken

[1] *Nuer-English Dictionary*, 1948, p. 60. [2] 'Dinka Songs', *Man*, 1913.

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only what was his own. Also, when a byre is destroyed by lightning Nuer tell him that they do not complain. The grass of the thatch is his, and he has a right to take what belongs to him. Likewise if a cow or an ox of your herd dies Nuer say that you must not complain if God takes his own beast. The cattle of your herd are his and not yours. If you grieve overmuch God will be angry that you resent his taking what is his. Better be content, therefore, that God should do what he wishes, seeing not that he has taken one of your cows but that he has spared the others. If you forget the cow God will see that you are poor and will spare you and your children and your other beasts. I cannot convey the Nuer attitude better than by quoting the Book of Job: 'the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (i. 21).[1]

Father Crazzolara records much the same of the Nuer in this respect as I have done. He says, for example, that if God kills a man or destroys property by lightning, Nuer say that he has only taken what was his, what was his right.[2] God is always in the right, always, as Nuer say, has *cuong*, a word I discuss later. Nuer also say, when some calamity has happened to them, *'thile me lele'*, which means that there is nothing which can be done about it because it is the will of God and therefore beyond man's control.

People comfort a man who has lost cattle by telling him these things, but they find it hard to comfort a youth who has lost his *dil thek*, his favourite ox, for he is young and the ox was perhaps his only ox and has been his companion. He has cared for it and played with it and danced and sung to it. He now sits by himself and pines, and his friends try to cheer him up. They tell him that he must not be tearful or God will be angry: 'God is good, he might have taken you, but he has taken your ox instead.' Here we have a further and very common reflection in adversity. God has been gracious and he has taken something belonging to a man and has spared the man himself. What appears to be misfortune is therefore really fortune. Nuer here use the word *gang*, to shield or protect, saying that the thing has shielded the man.

[1] This quotation is also given by Professor and Mrs. Seligman (op. cit., p. 230). It was, however, like most of their account of the Nuer, taken from my notebooks. I mention this fact because I have found that Professor and Mrs. Seligman are often quoted, for example by P. W. Schmidt in his *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*, as independent authorities. This is no fault of Professor and Mrs. Seligman, but it makes nevertheless for confusion.

[2] Op. cit., p. 96.

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can offer sacrifice on behalf of himself or others, intermediaries are not required.

Before giving an account of the succession of acts which constitute a sacrifice it is advisable to say further that though the acts are almost always the same and performed in the same order they are much more elaborate on some occasions than on others. A mortuary ceremony must begin between dawn and sunrise and is carried out by long, slow, solemn stages. The rites of sacrifice at marriage ceremonies are, on the contrary, often carried out in a perfunctory manner, giving the impression that they are regarded as little more than a formality. Likewise there is much variation in the attention paid to the rites by those present but not taking an active part in them. In some sacrifices they pay little attention to them, or even ignore them altogether, continuing their dancing or talking among themselves about their own affairs. Thus, in my experience, at sacrifices in marriage ceremonies only close kin of the persons immediately concerned take much, or even any, interest in the ritual. Even sacrifices in honour of a spirit may be performed in a perfunctory manner, it being thought that all that is required is that a beast be offered so that the spirit may know that it has not been forgotten. But on occasions of serious sickness, of grave danger, and of death the spectators sit quietly in a line or semicircle and give silent attention to what is being said and done. The amount of attention paid and its intensity depend on the nature of the occasion and the degree to which spectators are personally involved.

Therefore the many attempts that have been made to explain primitive religions in terms of supposed psychological states—awe, religious thrill, and so forth—are, as far as the Nuer are concerned, inept because the feelings of officiants and spectators are, in so far as they are discernible, clearly different on different occasions and in different parts of the same ceremony. This is obvious to anyone who sees a few Nuer sacrifices. Some people are paying attention and others not. Some are solemn, others gay. Wedding and funeral sacrifices do not evoke the same response, nor do initiation and incest sacrifices, nor even the opening and closing sacrifices of a mortuary ceremony. The feelings of close kin are not the same as those of distant kin. There is no need to labour the point. What is important in sacrifice is not how people feel, or even how they behave—a serious mien when the occasion is a solemn one is a

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matter of sentiment and good manners, not of religion. What is important is that the essential acts of sacrifice be carried out and, especially in personal sacrifices, with a right intention, which is a matter of disposition, not of emotion.

III

Almost all sacrifices, whether personal or collective, have the same general features. A description of one is therefore, apart from details, a description of almost all. The victim is brought to the place of sacrifice and there are performed in succession the four acts which compose the sacrificial drama: presentation, consecration, invocation, and immolation. Other features may be added, such as libations and aspersions and, mostly in sacrifices to spirits, hymn-singing, but these are supernumerary acts. The essential rites of the sacrifice proper are the four I have mentioned. They form what might be called the canon of sacrifice.

The first act is the *pwot*, the driving into the ground of a tethering-peg and the tethering of the animal to it. The officiant presents the victim to God. The man who stakes the victim is called *pwot yang*, the tetherer of the cow, and as in collective sacrifices this is generally done by the master of ceremonies of the family concerned he is commonly referred to in a sacrificial context by this title. Sometimes, after the victim has been staked, a libation, of milk, beer, or water, is poured over, or at the foot of, the peg.

Then takes place the *buk*, the rubbing (with ashes), the act of consecration (Plate VIII). The man who is about to speak the first invocation rubs ashes of cattle-dung lightly on the victim's back with his right hand. Each speaker does this in turn, and in some sacrifices all present place ash on the victim's back whether they make invocations or not. I discuss later (pp. 261–2 and 279–81) the meaning of rubbing ashes, when I shall try to show that it is not only a consecration of the beast to God but also an identification of man with ox.

Then takes place the *lam*, the invocation (Plate IX). The officiant, holding his spear in his right hand, speaks to God over the consecrated victim. The invocation states the intention of the sacrifice and matters relevant to it. Occasionally, when a sacrifice is a very perfunctory affair, no words are spoken. When asked about the omission Nuer say that the sacrifice is the *lam*, by which they

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/2/ Explanations of primitive religions were often couched at the same time both in terms of historical origins and of psychological origins, which made for great confusion, especially as the logical and chronological senses of 'primitive' and 'origin' were also seldom kept distinct. The psychological explanations were very varied, changing with changes in psychological theory. Intellectualist interpretations were succeeded by emotionalist interpretations and they by psycho-analytical intepretations. Religion was discussed and explained in terms of association of ideas, of personification of natural phenomena, of awe, of thrill, of fear, anxiety and frustration, of projection, and so forth. Most of these theories have long ago been discredited as naive introspective guesses.

• 78/ /2/ Certainly one cannot speak of any specifically religious emotion for the Nuer. One can only judge by overt behaviour on occasions of religious activity and, as I have noted, on such occasions Nuer may be afraid, anxious, joyful, indifferent, or in other states, according to the situation and the degree to which they are involved in it. Miss Ray Huffman says that their religion is one of fear,[1] and I feel I ought to say, and I do so with her permission, that this is the one point with which Dr. Mary Smith finds serious fault in my account of it. She, like Miss Huffman, holds that it is a religion of fear, even of terror. For me this is an over-simplification and a misunderstanding. It is true that Nuer, like everyone else, fear death, bereavement, sickness, and other troubles, and that it is precisely in such situations that they so often pray and sacrifice. It can be admitted also that, in that these troubles are manifestations of Spirit, they fear Spirit and wish to be rid of it. But we cannot say that on that account their religion is simply one of fear, which is, moreover, a very complex state of mind, and one not easy to define or assess. On the contrary, it is because Nuer are afraid of these misfortunes that one might speak of their religion as one of hope and comfort. But I think what fits the facts best is to say that it is a religion of both fear and trust, which may be opposites but are not contraries, or that the Nuer attitude towards Spirit might be described as ambiguous, and perhaps as ambivalent. The question is much complicated by the different ways Nuer represent Spirit to themselves and their different attitudes to it at different levels of representation. We have further to recognize

[1] Op. cit., p. 56.

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that the sense of guilt which is often so evident in misfortunes is not just fear but a complex psychological state, and also that it varies in intensity from one situation to another. Nuer thought in these matters is involved, for a serious danger may not be just an adventitious intrusion of Spirit into human affairs. It often has a moral significance. It is then not so much regarded as a natural crisis which can be overcome by spiritual aid as a moral crisis brought about by human action, and of which the outcome, it is thought, may depend on so delicate and indiscernible a factor as intention. Faced with so complex and variable a problem, to speak of Nuer religion simply as one of fear or awe, or as a projection or as cathartic, and so forth, must be a distortion, and one that does not greatly help us to understand it. All emotions enter into it; they blend; and there is nothing constant that we can say is characteristic of the religious life, which is rather to be defined in terms of disposition than of emotion.

Sociological theories of religion have frowned on evolutionary and psychological explanations alike. They have rather sought to understand primitive religions, or certain aspects of them, as products of social life. Fustel de Coulanges, Robertson Smith, Durkheim, Mauss, Hertz, and others have shown successfully that many features of these religions can be understood only by sociological analysis, by relating them to the social structure. This is true of Nuer religion. I do not think, for example, that the configuration of Spirit, the faults which are regarded as sins, and the roles of master of ceremonies, priest, and prophet in sacrifice can be fully understood without a knowledge of the social order. But Durkheim and his colleagues and pupils were not content to say that religion, being part of the social life, is strongly influenced by the social structure. They claimed that the religious conceptions of primitive peoples are nothing more than a symbolic representation of the social order. It is his society that primitive man worships in the symbol of a god. It is to his society that he prays and makes sacrifice. This postulate of sociologistic metaphysic seems to me to be an assertion for which evidence is totally lacking. It was Durkheim and not the savage who made society into a god.

All these theories about primitive religions, evolutionary, psychological, and sociological, suffered from a common weakness. The facts on which they were based were both inadequate and unreliable. Indeed, such wide generalizations could only have